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ABSTRACT

This booklet describes the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, an organization that allows the teaching profession to set high and rigorous standards for itself, create meaningful performance assessments based on the standards, and identify experienced teachers who meet the standards. National Board Certification focuses on knowledge, performance, and professional judgment. This completely voluntary process takes 1 year and provides opportunities for collaboration and reflection as teachers refine and strengthen their skills on the basis of standards written and reviewed by their peers. This booklet examines what National Board Certification is; what the framework of National Board certificates is; who is eligible for National Board Certification; how National Board Certification works; how to apply for National Board Certification; how to afford National Board Certification; reasons to consider National Board Certification; readiness for National Board Certification; and where to get more information. (SM)

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The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. What? Why? How?

American Federation of Teachers

May 1998

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The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

WHAT?

WHY?

HOW?

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AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

WHAT?
WHY?
HOW?

"We must recruit, support, and retain the most talented people into teaching."

We must invest in high-quality teacher preparation and ongoing professional development.

We must require tougher licensing and certification standards for teachers, and increase dramatically the number of teachers who meet the demanding standards of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards."

—U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
AFL•CIO

555 NEW JERSEY AVENUE, N.W.
WASHINGTON, DC 20001-2079
202 879-4400

SANDRA FELDMAN
President

EDWARD J. McELROY
Secretary-Treasurer

Dear AFT Member:

In 1985, AFT President Al Shanker called for a voluntary national certification system to recognize outstanding classroom teachers. At that time, there was no broad consensus of standards for excellence in teaching against which experienced teachers could assess their knowledge and skills and be recognized as accomplished professionals. But that changed with the establishment of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards -- an organization on whose board Al sat as a founding member and on which I currently serve.

It is important to remember that National Board Certification is a completely voluntary assessment of teaching that involves a rigorous examination of a teacher's actual practice in the classroom. And, most significantly, it is an assessment system developed for and by teachers. Teachers hold the majority of seats on the NBPTS board of directors and on the committees that write standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do. Teachers review and comment on the standards before they are adopted and they field test the assessment exercises. And, teachers administer and score the certification exercises.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is unique -- it strengthens the teaching profession as a whole, while it benefits individual teachers. Indeed, many of our locals have negotiated additional pay, continuing education credit, or "lead teacher" status for National Board Certified teachers. Such incentives vary from district to district and state to state. But, even where such rewards are not available, and even if teachers try and do not gain certification, they all report that the National Board certification process is an extraordinary learning experience. Teachers tell us that the NBPTS assessment process made a profound impact on them, causing them to analyze, reassess, and sometimes modify their teaching and the way they work with students.

If you are not already familiar with National Board Certification, this booklet will answer some of your questions and tell you how to find more information. I urge you to take this opportunity to learn more about National Board Certification and make it the centerpiece in your plans for professional growth.

In solidarity,

Sandra Feldman
Sandra Feldman
President

What Is National Board Certification?

National Board Certification is a significant step in professionalizing teaching, a credential that says a teacher's knowledge, skills, and accomplishments have been recognized by his or her peers. Developed by and for classroom teachers, National Board Certification allows the profession to set high and rigorous standards for itself, create meaningful performance assessments based on those standards, and identify experienced teachers who meet the standards.

Unlike state licensing systems, which set entry-level standards for beginning teachers, National Board Certification establishes advanced standards for experienced teachers. Where state licensing focuses on course requirements and varies from state to state, National Board Certification focuses on knowledge, performance, and professional judgment, reflecting nationally recognized standards that were set by teachers. And National Board Certification—unlike state licensing—is completely voluntary.

The year-long certification process provides outstanding opportunities for collaboration and reflection as teachers refine and strengthen their skills on the basis of standards written and reviewed by their peers. Teachers demonstrate their progress in meeting the standards through an innovative two-part performance assessment that goes far beyond the usual checklist evaluation or short-answer test:

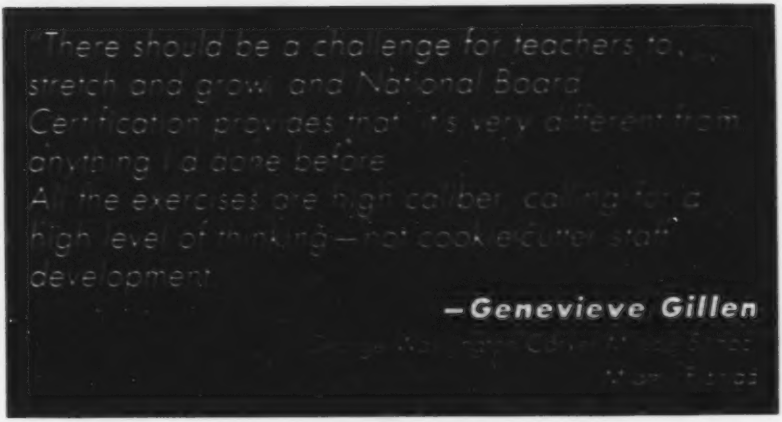
School-site portfolio. At their own schools, teachers compile a portfolio that includes four or five classroom-based exercises—such as videotaped lessons and samples of student work, together with written analysis—plus documentation of their accomplishments outside the classroom with colleagues, parents, and the community.

Assessment center exercise. At assessment centers located around the country, teachers complete four 90-minute written tasks and exercises, such as simulated situations or discussions of instructional issues.

This certification system is operated by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), an independent, nonprofit organization led by a 63-member board of directors, the majority of

whom are classroom teachers. Teachers have also played the leading role in developing standards in more than 30 certificate fields, which are defined by student developmental level and subject areas (see the framework on page 7 and 8 for a list of the certificate areas). In addition, the portfolio and assessment center exercises are scored by teachers who have been specially trained in performance assessment.

To date, 912 teachers have received National Board Certification. Many of them took advantage of local and state fee supports and incentives in deciding to stand for certification, and many successful candidates have received financial bonuses, as well. But regardless of incentives or rewards, these teachers say they value the opportunity for intense analysis of their teaching and the deep sense of personal and professional achievement they gain through the National Board Certification process.


There should be a challenge for teachers to
stretch and grow and National Board
Certification provides that. It's very different from
anything I've done before.
All the exercises are high caliber, calling for a
high level of thinking—not cookie-cutter staff
development.
—Genevieve Gillen

Framework of National Board Certificates

Early Childhood (Ages 3-8)
Generalist*

Middle Childhood (Ages 7-12)
Generalist*
English Language Arts
Mathematics
Science
Social Studies-History

Early and Middle Childhood (Ages 3-12)
Art
English as a New Language
Exceptional Needs/Generalist
Foreign Language
Guidance Counseling
Library/Media
Music
Physical Education

Early Adolescence (Ages 11-15)
Generalist*
English Language Arts*
Mathematics
Science
Social Studies-History

Adolescence and Young Adulthood (Ages 14-18+)
English Language Arts
Mathematics*
Science**
Social Studies-History

Early Adolescence through Young Adulthood (Ages 11-18+)

Art*
English as a New Language
Exceptional Needs/Generalist
Foreign Language
Guidance Counseling
Health
Library/Media
Music
Physical Education
Vocational Education

*Certificates are being offered in these six areas during the 1997-98 school year.

** This certificate is under development and may also be offered in the 1997-98 schoolyear.

Who Is Eligible for National Board Certification?

Most experienced teachers in public or private schools are eligible. The process is open to you if you:

- have completed a baccalaureate degree;
- have taught for a minimum of three years at the early childhood, elementary, middle school, or secondary school level; and
- have held a valid state teaching license for each of those years. (Where a license is not required, you must teach in a school that is recognized and approved by the state.)

How Does National Board Certification Work?

National Board Certification has three components: the standards, the portfolio, and the assessment center.

1. *The standards.* If you decide to pursue National Board Certification, your first step is to study the standards in your chosen certificate area so that you will understand how they might be reflected in your classroom teaching. All NBPTS standards are based on five "core propositions" that define the "knowledge, skills, dispositions, and commitments" that distinguish accomplished teachers:

- Teachers are committed to students and their learning.
- Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students.
- Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning.
- Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience.
- Teachers are members of learning communities.

(From the NBPTS policy statement *What Teachers Should Know and Be Able To Do*)

Specific standards for each subject area and student age group are developed by committees made up of teachers and subject area specialists, and they are reviewed extensively by teachers and other educators before being adopted. In each certificate field, the standards are presented in a two-part format:

"As a teacher, you become so isolated—afraid to talk about what you believe in, holding your breath, hoping not to incur the wrath of the administration. But National Board Certification has kept a lot of us from leaving the profession."

—Sandra Richardson,

Puesta Del Sol Elementary School, El Rancho, New Mexico

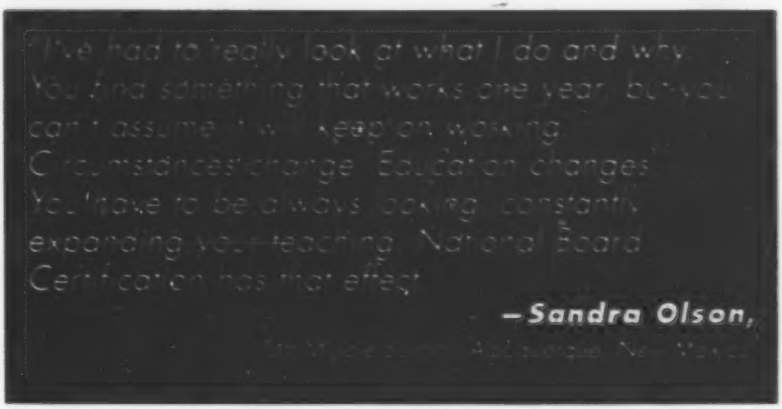
- *A summary statement,* which describes specific aspects of a teacher's practice that have an impact on students.
- *An elaboration,* which puts the summary statement in context and explains the knowledge and skills the teacher needs in order to meet the standard.

For example, in the Middle Childhood/Generalist Standards, one summary standard reads: "Accomplished teachers draw on their knowledge of subject matter and curriculum to make sound decisions about what is important for students to learn within and across the subject areas that comprise the middle school curriculum." The elaboration of that standard describes the curricular knowledge and pedagogical skills expected of an accomplished teacher in this area, using examples of actions and attitudes that meet the standard.

National Board standards do not set out any one best approach to teaching, however. While they reflect broad professional consensus on what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do, they acknowledge the complexity and uniqueness of teaching and recognize that teachers need to be able to call on a wide range of teaching strategies and methods in order to respond appropriately to all students.

You can order copies of the standards from NBPTS. Call 1-800-22-TEACH or visit the NBPTS web site, www.nbpts.org.

2. The portfolio. This is your chance to choose evidence from your teaching that shows your understanding of the standards, your


I've had to really look at what I do and why.
You find something that works one year, but you
can't assume it will keep on working.
Circumstances change. Education changes.
You have to be always looking, constantly
expanding your teaching. National Board
Certification has that effect.
—Sandra Olson,

knowledge of your students and your subject area, your ability to make sound professional judgments about student learning, and your skill in acting effectively on those judgments.

Portfolios vary for each certificate, but the exercises typically require evidence of a particular teaching episode and your written reflections about it. For example, one exercise from the Early Childhood/Generalist portfolio focuses on a "teaching and learning sequence" that shows how you "nurture children's growth and learning" as you explore a theme drawn from the social studies and the arts. The exercise asks you to submit up to ten pages of written commentary and four supporting work samples to illustrate a two- to four-week teaching and learning sequence you have used in your classroom. The sequence must be unified by some core theme or topic; it must integrate social studies with the arts; and it must illustrate your efforts to build strong ties with children's families. Two of the work samples or materials you submit must relate to students' learning, and two must relate to your evaluation of the success of the sequence.

Some portfolio exercises call for videotapes of actual lessons in your classroom. Teachers often find these videotapes challenging. Here's how one teacher described the experience:

> "Videotaping myself was sheer agony. . . . My classroom practices were based on sound theory—or were they? I didn't know and had no gauge to measure what I had been doing. The standards to measure my teaching performance were in front of me, but I didn't know how to produce the evidence that I had reached those standards. I had never been asked to analyze my own teaching practices. . . ."
>
> —Ann Sayas, "To Grow a Teacher," *Teacher to Teacher*, Spring 1996)

But for this teacher and others, the videotape provoked self-analysis that led to professional growth. "I had to look deep inside myself as a professional and understand my own strengths as well as weaknesses," said one teacher about the experience. But working with a colleague who viewed and critiqued practice tapes helped this teacher gain new perspectives on her lessons and her interactions with students. "I have learned more about myself as a professional during these past months than I have in the past eight and a half years that I have taught," she said.

Most teachers say they spend about 120 hours compiling their portfolios, an average of about one day a week over a semester. And most agree that the time is well spent—in fact, many say it is one of the most valu-

able professional development experiences of their lives.

A portfolio sampler, which includes sample portfolio exercises from six certificate fields, is available from NBPTS.

> "On my own, without the extrinsic incentive of the portfolio process, I never would have been able to be so introspective and reflective about my teaching. I wouldn't have gone as deep. We use a lot of portfolio assessment at my school. Now, I don't mind asking my students to do what I've done—to work hard and think about what they are doing and why."
>
> —Susan Coley
> Cleveland Middle School
> Albuquerque, New Mexico

3. *The assessment center.* The final step in the National Board Certification process is the assessment center, where you will spend a full day completing additional exercises away from your school. Exercises are offered for several weeks each summer, and you can reserve a date, time, and place convenient for you. There are more than 200 assessment centers; at least one in every state.

At the assessment center, you might be asked to plan a lesson around materials you were sent in advance, or to write a brief essay about an issue in pedagogy, or to analyze a videotape of another teacher at work, or to take part in an interview. Where the portfolio gives you a chance to demonstrate your teaching, these exercises complement the portfolio by calling on the knowledge, skills, and judgment that undergird your portfolio performance.

Both the portfolio entries and the assessment center exercises are scored by classroom teachers in your field who have received intensive training in performance assessment. Scoring is based on all of the evidence you have submitted—videotapes, written commentary, students' work samples, and responses to the assessment center exercises. Each entry is scored independently by several assessors, using agreed-upon scoring criteria.

4. *Results.* You'll learn how you did in mid- to late fall, after the assessors have scored your portfolio and assessment center exercises. Along with the results, you'll be sent a feedback report, which includes an overview of the scoring guides, an explanation of how the scores on the various exercises are weighted, and an actual portfolio entry that received a score of 3, or pass. The feedback report also includes tips on how you can extrapolate from this portfolio entry to your own so that you can bet-

ter understand the score you received.

If you find you've done well on some exercises but not well enough on others to earn National Board Certification, a new policy allows you to "bank" scores for up to three years. During that three-year period, you may submit new portfolio entries or retake assessment center exercises and have a new total score calculated.

How Do I apply for National Board Certification?

Applications will be available as of June 1, 1998 for the seven certifications being offered during the 1998-99 year:

- Early Childhood/Generalist (ages 3-8)
- Middle Childhood/Generalist (ages 7-12)
- Early Adolescence/Generalist (ages 11-15)
- Early Adolescence/English Language Arts (ages 11-15)
- Early Adolescence through Young Adulthood/Art (ages 11-18+)
- Adolescence and Young Adulthood/Mathematics (ages 14-18+)
- Adolescence and Young Adulthood/Science (ages 14-18+)

An additional five certificates are planned to be available December 1, 1998:

- Early Adolescence/Mathematics (ages 11-15)
- Early Adolescence/Science (ages 11-15)
- Early Adolescence/Social Studies-History (ages 11-15)
- Adolescence and Young Adulthood/English Language Arts (ages 14-18+)
- Adolescence and Young Adulthood/Social Studies-History (ages 14-18+)

Applications for these twelve certificates must be postmarked by December 1, 1998. Portfolio instructions will be sent to you after your application has been received. For the seven certificates available June 1, 1998, completed portfolios must arrive at the National Board by April 16, 1999. For the five certificates slated to be available December 1, 1998, the

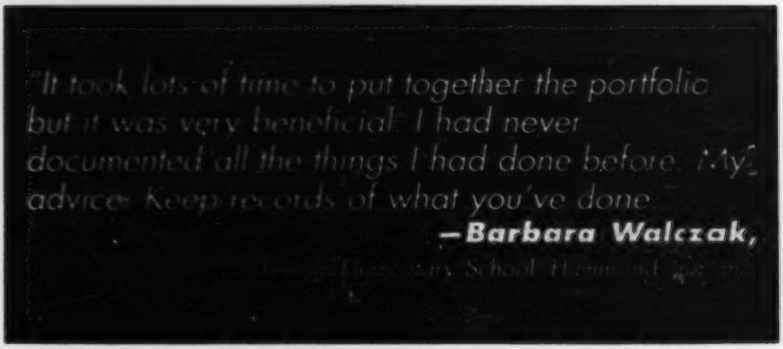
anticipated due date for these portfolios is June 4, 1999. Because it generally takes four or five months to complete a portfolio, it's a good idea to apply early.

For application materials, call 1-800-22-TEACH.

Can I Afford National Board Certification?

The fee for National Board Certification is $2,000, at least $500 of which is required with your application. As an AFT member, you can fund this fee through an AFT-JOIN loan, which allows you to set up affordable payments and take several years to repay the loan. For more information or to request a loan application, call toll free, Monday through Friday, 1-888-AFT-JOIN.

In addition, many local school districts, state legislatures, or departments of education, and unions either pay the application fee or offer incentive grants to help defray the cost. In Minnesota, for example, the St. Paul School District, in collaboration with the St. Paul Federation of Teachers, the University of Minnesota, and others, paid the application fee and provided professional support programs for 20 teachers in 1995-96 and another 20 in 1996-97. In New York, the New York State United Teachers is offering to pay $1,500, to be awarded in three steps, to 140 of its Effective Teaching Program instructors who stand for National Board Certification. And in Ohio, the state legislature appropriated funds to pay the application fees for up to 400 teachers in the 1996-97 school year.


It took lots of time to put together the portfolio but it was very beneficial. I had never documented all the things I had done before. My advice: Keep records of what you've done.
—Barbara Walczak,

All states and the District of Columbia have the opportunity to participate in the Candidate Subsidy Program. Under the program, funds recommended by President Clinton and appropriated by the U.S. Congress have been made available to help subsidize the $2,000 candidate fee for teachers pursuing National Board Certification in 1998-99, and with continued appropriations, very possibly in 1999-2000 and subsequent years. Contact your state department of education to determine what fee supports are available.

To find out more about fee supports and incentives where you live, ask your local or state union leaders or check the "Where It's Happening" section of the NBPTS web page (www.nbpts.org).

Why Should I Consider National Board Certification?

Depending on their local contracts, some teachers receive direct monetary awards, steps up the salary scale, or recognition as lead or master teachers as a result of National Board Certification, but most who have been through the process cite other compelling benefits as well:

Professional development. Unlike the typical one-shot, one-size-fits-all approach to professional development, the year-long certification process allows teachers to focus intently on their own strengths and weaknesses, leading them to reflect on how their practice meets the profession's standards for accomplished teaching. Whether they attain certification or not, almost all candidates find the experience makes them stronger teachers—and more aware of what works and what doesn't in the classroom. "The National Board Certification process is definitely one of inquiry," said Barbara Winkfield of Southfield, Mich. "I examined and reexamined every aspect of my teaching practice. I reflected and drew upon all the best practices I'd learned." For most teachers, the experience is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"I was almost ready to quit teaching. I thought I knew what should be done in the classroom, but I needed some validation that my instincts were right. National Board Certification was a turning point for me—I felt as if I were coming out of the closet. I thought I was at the end of my teaching career, but National Board Certification was a new beginning. I don't know where I'll go from here, but I know there's absolutely no way I can be driven out of the teaching profession now."

—Sandra Richardson
Puesta Del Sol Elementary School
Rio Rancho, New Mexico

Collaboration. Most teachers have little or no opportunity to share ideas and information with each other; instead they are, in the words of one teacher, trapped in a "solitary teaching bubble." Working in teams to earn certification, teachers can burst that bubble and gain valuable support from each other and insight into their own performance through their colleagues' eyes. This collaboration can take many forms. In a North Carolina school district, for example, candidates for certification gathered weekly for dinner and discussion at one teacher's home. In a Colorado district, a mentor group of National Board Certified teachers met regularly with new candidates to help them work through the process. Through collaborative arrangements such as these, teachers can work together to clarify their goals, interpret the standards, provide resources for each other, and give each other constructive feedback and moral support.

New roles for teachers. Traditionally, the only way to advance in a teaching career was to leave the classroom. National Board Certification is beginning to change that by opening the way for new roles for accomplished teachers. Already, many school districts and states are conferring "master teacher" or "lead teacher" designation on certified teachers, with the accompanying salary increments. (See the "Where It's Happening" section of the NBPTS web site, www.nbpts.org, for a list of rewards and incentives.) And in some areas, teachers who earn National Board Certification are playing leadership roles in teacher training, student assessment, curriculum development, and the evaluation of non-tenured teachers. Genevieve Gillen, an English teacher at George Washington Carver Middle School in Miami, is one such teacher. Gillen is working with teacher educators at the University of Miami to infuse the university's teacher education program with NBPTS objectives. "The more that happens," says Gillen, "the easier it will be for younger teachers to see National Board Certification as a natural extension of their training, an

"National Board Certification is very important to the profession. It's another way to prove your competence and your intelligence. It's really rigorous. I didn't have a video camera and had to borrow one. I didn't even have a computer and had to type my portfolio entries. But believe me, it can be done."

—Mary Edmunds,

on-going professional growth experience."

Personal accomplishment. National Board Certification requires a considerable commitment of time, money, and effort, but like many challenging endeavors, completing it can be very satisfying. Bruce Boehne of Ramona, Calif., put it this way: "I have a deep feeling of accomplishment in achieving National Board Certification that can never be taken away. When I have 'bad' days, the thought that I have something behind me that shows I really am an accomplished educator is a good feeling to fall back on, and it always lifts my spirits. The huge amount of time and effort spent to accomplish this was definitely worth it."

Changing the culture of the school. Ever since the publication of A Nation at Risk in 1983, education has been the target of one reform initiative after another. Generally mandated from the top down, these initiatives have largely failed to make any real difference in the way schools work—or in the results they produce. But by giving teachers the major role in designing a system that recognizes accomplished teaching, National Board Certification has put in place a bottom-up reform strategy that promises lasting change. "National Board Certification is different from run-of-the-mill reforms primarily because it will cause teachers like me to look critically at their own practice," wrote David Haynes, a teacher-in-residence at the National Board and a member of the Early Adolescence/Generalist Standards Committee. "This kind of critical reflection is important not only for individual teachers but also for the

entire educational process in our country."

Other teachers agree. "I cannot ask myself why I do a particular thing and how I might do it better and then go to a team meeting and not ask the same questions of my colleagues," said Karen Bean, of Bethel, Maine. "As I change, those around me are affected. The culture in the school begins to change; teachers don't do things just because they always have, but rather they begin to examine what they do."

Recognizing the power of the National Board Certification process, teacher educators and school administrators are beginning to incorporate the standards into pre-service and in-service programs and beginning to adopt standards-based performance assessment strategies. But the real reform starts in the classroom, where teachers like the ones quoted here are bringing a heightened professionalism to the complex and rewarding work of teaching and learning.

Am I ready for National Board Certification?

Just because you meet the eligibility requirements does not necessarily mean you're ready for National Board Certification. Only you can answer that question. A good way to begin is with a careful review of the standards in your field. For each standard, try to formulate specific answers to these questions:

- What do I know with respect to this standard?
- What am I able to do with respect to this standard?
- How might I demonstrate proficiency in this standard?
- How could I prove to colleagues that I meet this standard?

Many teachers find it helpful to work through this process with one or more colleagues, and many also find it helpful to ask for advice and suggestions from teachers who have earned National Board Certification. (For a state-by-state list of these teachers, see the "Where It's Happening" section of the NBPTS web site, www.nbpts.org.).

Consider, too, whether this is the right point in your career or the best time in your personal life to commit yourself to the challenging and time-consuming certification process. You might also want to take into consideration whether an organized support system is available to you through your union, your school district, a local teacher center, or a nearby university. The presence of even an informal network of supportive colleagues and mentors can make a real difference in how you approach the certification process.

Finally, ask yourself honestly whether you are prepared to handle the possible disappointment if you do not earn certification—as well as the possible resentment of others if you do.

What if I decide I'm not ready?

Even if you decide not to stand for National Board Certification, you can still take advantage of the professional consensus that resides in the standards documents. Studying the standards is like entering into an intensive dialogue with master teachers in your field. The standards reflect best practices without being prescriptive, capturing the underlying knowledge, principles, philosophies, assumptions, and expectations that characterize accomplished practice. Reading the standards alone or discussing them with colleagues can be a valuable professional development experience in and of itself.

Where can I get more information?

If you'd like to know more about National Board Certification, contact:

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
26555 Evergreen Road, Suite 400
1-800-22-TEACH
Southfield, MI 48076
web site: *www.nbpts.org*

or

American Federation of Teachers
Educational Issues Department
555 New Jersey Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20001

555 NEW JERSEY AVENUE, NW
WASHINGTON, DC 20001-2079

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